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HTY 400: Senior Seminar—World's Fairs and Exhibitions

The Earle Shettleworth, Sr. Home Movies of the 1939/40 New York World's Fair

World's fairs during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were generally focused on remembering, preserving, and celebrating the past while establishing identity with the present. Such themes shifted with the 1939/40 World's Fair in New York, however. The focus went from preserving the past in the context of the present to looking at the future in terms of the present. Indeed, the directors of the New York World's Fair aimed to frame what the world of tomorrow might look like to fairgoers by displaying expansive highway systems, laborers and engineers holding hands, fluorescent lights, televisions for everyone, and long distance telephone calls. With such a daring and robust theme of projecting images of the future, it is hard to know what actual fairgoers took away from the fair. Did they in fact see and embrace what American corporations were showcasing as "the future?" Or, did they just remember the synchronized swimming routines of Billy Rose's Aquacade? While questions such as these are sometimes hard to answer with traditional historical research, sources such as home movies shot at the Fair itself and by fairgoers, offer an insightful vision to help answer such inquiries. Collections such as the Shettleworth home movies of the Fair, preserved at Northeast Historic Film in Bucksport, Maine, allow us to take such a personal look into the purported "world of tomorrow" as portrayed by the 1939/40 New York World's Fair.

What becomes instantly clear when viewing clips from the Shettleworth collection is the gravitation towards filming buildings and performances. Architecture, shows at the Aquacade, and various parades dominate the focus of movies. The Trylon

and Perisphere are filmed numerous times, often spliced repeatedly in between shots of extensive gardens and foreign buildings. It seems that every time the Shettleworths caught a glimpse of the Trylon and Perisphere as they walked around the Fair, they felt the need to capture it on film just to be sure they had footage of it. This repetitiveness falls in the same vein as taking family pictures in the pre-digital photography era where photographers took multiple exposures just to be sure they got the right shot with everyone's eyes open and smiling because one was never sure when the whole family would get together again. These repetitive shots of the dominant symbols of the fair—the Trylon and Perisphere— capture a sense of spectacle and perhaps, on behalf of the Shettleworths, the feeling of not knowing if they would ever see such sights anytime soon. The combination of awe and a desire to recreate this sensibility on film controlled their gaze and the way Shettleworth filmed preservation of the Fair. They would only get this one chance to see and document the Fair so they aimed the camera repeatedly at the Trylon and Perisphere because they wanted to make sure they caught it just right, eyes open and teeth showing, so to speak.

What is perhaps most striking about the Shettleworth films is not what is shown, but what *is not* shown. There is almost no footage of interiors of buildings. There could be several explanations for this. Perhaps they were not allowed to film inside. Maybe they just wanted to enjoy the shows and exhibits going on inside the buildings, or perhaps what was going on inside was not worthy of precious home movie film. What leads one to believe the latter is the splicing of scenes from downtown Manhattan's skyscrapers in the middle of shots from the Fair. Architecture and spectacle, both in the city itself and in the enormous, oddly shaped buildings at the Fair, caught the central focus of their

camera. Exhibits of the future world of tomorrow that included cars, new electronics, and travel fall short of the Shettleworth's attention and the sheer impressive grounds of the fair and the buildings within it comprise their filmed record. It was the stagnant architecture of the world of tomorrow that needed to be captured and preserved in the eyes of the Shettleworths, while the interiors that detailed what the world of tomorrow actually comprised escaped the permanent gaze of their film.

If the New York World's Fair of 1939/40 was supposed to portray their world of tomorrow through its architecture and exhibits, it seems only pieces of that message landed with audiences, particularly in the case of the Shettleworth home movies of the Fair. The futuristic architecture such as the Trylon and Perisphere dominate their experience and narrative. Spliced in between are scenes from downtown Manhattan and quick clips of flowers, statues, and other buildings. The lack of interior shots call for a mixed interpretation between the fact that they simply may have not been allowed to film indoors or perhaps they deemed it not worthy of film. Regardless, the Shettleworths walked away with an extensive visual record of the world of tomorrow. There is no evidence to suggest, however, that they had an interest in capturing the details or the actual products that would make up the world of tomorrow. Instead, it was the big, ominous, towers and buildings that housed such details that they deemed necessary for preservation in film. Perhaps they knew that such details and products of the future would eventually make their way into their home, so why bother to capture them on film? Or, perhaps they were simply more impressed with the Trylon and Perisphere than long distance phone calls. Whatever the case may be, it seems clear that spectacular, big, and stagnant features of the world of tomorrow are what such fairgoers like the Shettleworth

sought to remember and relive through the power of film, adding a sense of permanence to buildings that were never designed to be anything more than temporary structures.